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SUBJECT: NAMIBIAN ELECTION PRIMER

11. Summary. Namibia will hold its fourth National Assembly and Presidential elections on November 27 and 28. Fourteen political parties are contesting 72 National Assembly seats, and a record 12 candidates will contest the presidency. The ruling South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) party is widely expected to retain its parliamentary majority, albeit with a somewhat reduced margin, while the Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) is expected to emerge as the new "official" (leading) opposition party. However, a dearth of accurate polling data makes definite predictions difficult. SWAPO's presidential candidate, Hifikepunye Pohamba, is expected to be re-elected for another five-year term.

12. This cable is the fourteenth piece in a series on Namibia's preparations for the November 2009 elections. End Summary.

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Scramble for Parliamentary Seats  
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13. On November 27 and 28, Namibians will vote for 72 members of the National Assembly based on a party list system. Political parties have ranked their candidates, and voters will select a party rather than voting directly for a particular candidate. Parliamentary seats will be distributed on a proportional representation basis. The total number of votes cast will be divided by 72 to determine the quota necessary for winning one seat. The number of votes cast for a political party then will be divided by the quota to determine the number of seats for a given party.

14. SWAPO is all but certain to maintain its ruling party status. Despite allegations by the opposition of corruption and mismanagement, SWAPO remains popular. The ruling party has benefitted from legislation that allocates state resources for campaigning according to the number of National Assembly seats a party holds, in addition to the party's already sizable war chest. Nevertheless, it is not clear if SWAPO will be able to hold on to its two-thirds majority-- the representation needed to amend the constitution. SWAPO currently holds 55 seats (or 75 percent) in the National Assembly, and most commentators expect the party to hold on to at least 66 percent (48 seats or precisely two-thirds).

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SWAPO versus RDP  
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15. There are 14 registered political parties, but the spotlight will focus on the showdown between SWAPO and the largely untested RDP. Formed in 2007 by prominent SWAPO insiders and now led by former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hidipo Hamutenya, the RDP has mounted an ambitious campaign with limited resources. The party hopes to win between 20 and 30 seats, but many pundits project their showing is likelier to be closer to 5 to 10 seats. In any case, the RDP is expected to emerge as the new "official" (leading) opposition party.

16. Without scientific polling in Namibia, it is difficult to say from where the RDP is taking its support-- SWAPO, the other

opposition parties or both. SWAPO has clearly lost some of its more prominent members to the RDP, but the other opposition parties have struggled to raise adequate funds and organize campaign efforts. Moreover, three of the larger opposition parties, the Congress of Democrats (COD), the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), and the Republican Party (RP), have suffered from well-publicized internal squabbles that have weakened them and resulted in a departure of some of their members.

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Crowded Presidential Race  
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¶17. Namibia's President is directly elected. A record 12 candidates, including President Pohamba, have entered the race. Pohamba, who in 2004 defeated six other candidates by receiving 76 percent of the vote, is expected to win re-election handily. His most serious competition comes from Hamutenya, who lost to Pohamba in 2004, when the two vied to lead SWAPO at the party's controversial congress.

¶18. Many observers note that Pohamba has also benefited from his incumbent's status. He has been able to legally access state resources, such as transport and staff support, during the campaign. He has enjoyed widespread press coverage, while the opposition candidates have complained of little access to air time on state-owned media outlets. Pohamba remains popular throughout the country, particularly in populous northern regions of Namibia.

¶19. Namibian politics is centered around personalities rather than policies, but most of the candidates have highlighted poverty reduction, education, unemployment, and land reform in party manifestos and speeches. The opposition has also focused on

WINDHOEK 00000433 002 OF 003

corruption as one of its leading concerns.

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The Born Frees  
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¶10. Much has been made of the "born frees," the generation of eligible voters born after Namibia's independence in 1990. This group, which will be participating in its first national election, does not have the memories of the pre-liberation era. At least 20 percent of the electorate falls between the ages of 18 and 24. Analysts will be watching to see if SWAPO's liberation rhetoric, which is at the heart of its political platform, resonates with these younger voters.

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Violence  
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¶11. Unlike previous Namibian elections, incidents of political violence have marred the lead-up to the polling days. SWAPO and the RDP have faced off several times around the country, particularly in the northern Omusati region, where SWAPO members have tried to prevent the RDP from campaigning and holding political rallies. While none of these confrontations-- mostly rock throwing, fist fights and vehicle chases-- has resulted in casualties, many are troubled by the incidents and political leadership on both sides has repeatedly called for tolerance. The police have been praised by both parties for demonstrating a swift, even-handed, non-partisan response. Hoping to avoid confrontational rallies, some parties, such as the RDP, have also focused on new strategies for disseminating their message, including, text messages, websites, and door-to-door campaigns.

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Media Access  
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¶12. In addition to violence and intimidation, opposition parties have also complained about a lack of media access on state-owned broadcasters. In October, the RDP and COD attempted to obtain a high court order to force the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation

(NBC) to provide equal free airtime to all political parties, instead of a proportional system that largely benefitted the ruling SWAPO party. NBC responded by cancelling the free airtime altogether. The new policy angered the opposition, which claimed, unlike SWAPO, it did not possess the financial resources to pay for the airtime.

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Electoral Commission's Bungles  
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¶13. The Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) has spent much of the campaign season in hot water. It angered opposition parties in October by awarding the tender to print the election ballots to a SWAPO-owned company. The ECN was forced to re-advertise the tender, which eventually went to a South African company, after the opposition threatened a boycott and legal action over the original decision.

¶14. The ECN also generated controversy when it released the results of its registration efforts, announcing in September that 290,000 new voters registered for this year's National Assembly and Presidential election, bringing the total electorate to 1.3 million voters. That figure aroused suspicion because in 2004, 82,000 new voters registered and 818,395 Namibians cast their vote. The electoral body has admitted the voters roll contained duplicate entries, ghost voters, and even a few Angolan citizens, but promised that adequate checks and balances and security measures would prevent ineligible voters from participating in the elections, much less voting multiple times. The voters' roll was scrubbed by ECN officials and political parties and the ECN revised the estimated electorate to 1,181,835, but many remain skeptical of the list's accuracy.

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Observers  
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¶15. Embassy Windhoek has coordinated with European diplomatic missions to send 35 election observers around the country for the two days of voting. Other countries with a diplomatic presence, such as China (three observers) are also expected to participate. In addition, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), SADC Parliamentary Forum, the Electoral Commission Forum for SADC, the African Union and the Pan-African Parliament have brought delegations. South Africa's ANC, Mozambique's FRELIMO, Angola's

WINDHOEK 00000433 003 OF 003

MPLA, and Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF-- all close to SWAPO-- will also observe. Civil society will be represented by a large group from the Namibian Council of Churches and a coalition led by the Namibia Institute of Democracy (funded by a U.S. congressional earmark). Political party representatives will also be on hand at many of the 1200 fixed and mobile polling stations.

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Conclusion  
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¶16. Many expect the election days to go smoothly, possibly with some limited incidents of violence and other irregularities. Given the opposition and civil society's distrust of SWAPO and the ECN, legal challenges during the post-election period are likely. However, for the most part, this election should not spark many surprises. SWAPO will almost certainly perform strongly, and Pohamba should be re-elected president with a comfortable margin. The main uncertainties are whether SWAPO will retain its two-thirds majority in the National Assembly and how well the RDP will perform.